



ENVIRONMENT CONSERVATION OF NEPALI WOMEN: IN SOCIO-CULTURAL STANDPOINT

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to examine the social, cultural, spiritual as well as legal knowledge generation and their practices on environment conservation. It focuses on how religious beliefs as well as socio-cultural practices affect the way of conserving the natural resources and supporting for environment protection. Large number of animals and plants species has been found conserved and managed with the importance of religious/socio-cultural perspective in Nepal. This study is followed qualitative way to address the objectives designed in the study. Literature review is divided in 2 parts i.e., theoretical review and empirical review. Data analysis and interpretation is managed in thematic way. The study which explore the sociocultural knowledge and practice in environment conservation of Nepal would promote to the slogan of "Think globally, act locally" for environment conservation in the world.

KEYWORDS: socio-culture, spiritual, religious, ethics, environment conservation.

BACKGROUND:

Socio-cultural and religious perspective have played a significant role in the development of relationship between human and natural system. Cultural and religious (spiritual) practices of human can contribute to rethink and responding to the world environment and management of natural resources (Niraula, & Singh, 2015).

Human beings are going ahead to promote their economic and social life standards. According to Adhikari (2008) development of science and technology, population growth and their necessities are increasing day by day. Natural resources like forest, fuels, lands, minerals, etc. are being consumed numerous for their industries in the world. Sakya (1998) claims, in the result environment pollution is standing as the main crisis of water pollution, air pollution, climate change, drought in the world.

In this situation, women's sociocultural practices can help to minimize the degradation of environment. Davidson (as cited in Rodda, 1994) also claims that "women as producers and carriers are wholly dependent upon the renewability of natural systems to provide food, fuel, water and shelter" (p. 6). The author opines more women are cultural guardians and the first educators, they respect and value the environment in many ways. It is consider that over of the Third World, they are the main environmental managers.

There are different kinds of social and cultural beliefs and practices in Nepal. As gender perspective women have responsibility of raring and careering of her family as well as nature. Another interesting culture in Nepal is that the couples who have not children would construct a *chautara* (rest platform), plant Bar (*Ficus bengalensis*) and Peepal (*F. religiosa*) trees and then organize a marriage ceremony of these trees (Adhikari, 2008). More over a Hindu Sanskrit text (Rig Veda) has been motivated society for planting trees in *chautaras* and in other places. It is also mentioned that if one preserves nature, nature will preserve him/her. Nepali women therefore worship the trees like Bar-Peepal regularly for the well being of her family (Ibid).

In the study of International Union of Conservation of Nature [IUCN] (1990) observed that ninety three percent of Nepalese women are involved in collection of natural resources like fodder, fuel, wild food etc. According to Adhikari (2008) most of the time in a day spent the women on these activities for their livelihood. So forest and women relation is deeply interlinked. Therefore it is easily considered that women would never intentionally destroy natural resources as their lives highly dependent on them. In the result, it promotes to be greenery of earth and environment friendly performance at their behaviour. By this important behavior of women, can spread messages and knowledge in society to respect natural resources and preserve them.

So the researchers motivated to carry out an inquiry of Nepali women's sociocultural knowledge and practices which is contributing to promote and protect environment. This study focuses on the obtaining the following objectives:

- To determine the women's social and cultural status of environment protection in Nepal

- To explore the religious (spiritual) belief of environment conservation

LITERATURE REVIEW:

In this section, has drawn theoretical stands and previous works as concern of this study.

Theoretical issues: within Bourdieu's four capital theories i.e., social capital, cultural capital, symbolic capital, economic capital. Social capital promotes the relation of groupings and social networks. Similarly, cultural capital enhances the interpersonal skills, habits, life styles etc. (Turner, 2003)). Symbolic capital explores the symbols to legitimate the levels or group. While economic capital gives priority to produce or earn money. In general these theories will be used to understand the women's endeavors in the present research.

According to Sing (2000) Hinduism believes in all compassing sovereignty of the devine, manifesting itself in a graded scale of evolution. The Atharva Veda has the magnificent hymn to the Earth which is redolent with ecological and environmental values. According to Teertha, (2000) of Hindu philosophy, the goal of human life is the realization of the state of peace. Dharma is the source by which peace can be fully realized. This process is not the stillness of death; but it is a dynamic harmony among all the diverse facets of life. Humanity, as a part of natural world, can contribute through Dharma to this natural harmony.

According to Bhattachan (2008) Nepal is a multicultural, multilingual and multi religious and secular country. Therefore her people follow Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Christian and so on. Their culture and religion have their own philosophy and practices for environment conservation. But this study is focused on culture and women's knowledge and practice on environment conservation.

Eco-feminism tries to link the relation of women and natural system. Ghimire and Adhikari (2003) view that the theory also forwards the patriarchies and science and technology are violating on female and nature altogether. In the result environmental pollution is occurring in the world.

REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL WORKS:

Many activities and movements may have been initiated by women for environment conservation, because women are considered as a nature career. Shrestha (2000) observes that Hindu culture has a very close relation with environment. Therefore they worship various natural elements like sun, moon, river, rocks etc. in the form of god/goddesses. They also worship of living beings such as animals and plants. They worship lion as the form of Durga, bull as shiva, mouse as Ganesh and so on. Likewise, they have equal important value of plants in Hindu culture. They use them as ritual plants in different religious functions and ceremonies. According to Shrestha (2000), they worship and respect different sacred plants like, peepal (*Ficus religiosa*) in the form of Vishnu, Bel (*F. bengalensis*) as the Maheswar/Shiva, mango (*Mangifera indica*) as Laxmi, Tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*) as Vishnu/Laxmi.

Hindu culture and practice has eco-centric theme. So planting of tree is religious duty while cutting of trees and destruction of them is considered as a sinful act. It is believed that god/goddesses dwell in the tree so that they protect sacred

plants/groves and prohibited to fetch that sources.

According to Rodda (1994) various roles of women play in food processing, farming, agricultural management and family health. It is crucial that their understanding of environmental issues should be increased and their knowledge and skills taken into account in the conservation strategy of natural resources.

ICIMOD (2002) reports that, according to our traditional culture, women have the role of collecting fuel wood and forest products, fetching water and growing crops are the function of natural resource managers in many countries. So they are called "environmental managers" (Homburgh, 1993, p. 74). There is a difference between use and management. Where management implies that deliberate measures are taken to increase or sustain the resource and its yield. Perhaps, real management is only possible when the manager has control over the resources; therefore it should be spoken of women as "potential managers".

According to Greenberg (2003) women's role in plant management and conservation may be as agriculture itself. Women have managed and conserved plants through the centuries because plants meet a variety of households needs for food, medicine, ornament, income generation and trade among others. However they collect the resources without the process of degrading forever.

Women also play a role for healer who have knowledge of medicinal plant. Also medicinal plant tulsi (*Oscimum sanctum*) the Hindus keep in yard is largely taken care of by women. It is the women who do the planting and worship the plant every morning. The city dweller women also preserve the plant in the pot on the building. On this regard Bodeker (1999) viewed "the survival of the knowledge associated with the plant is attributed to the fact that belongs to the women's domain" (p. 270).

Borjas (as cited in Howard, 2003) remained that plant biodiversity constitutes the greatest part of many indigenous and peasant women's wealth. The women's welfare and social status are strongly related to their management of plant biodiversity and the plant related contributions to subsistence and their technical environmental and cultural knowledge.

In Sociocultural point of view, women should maintain their home smearing and sweeping. Women involve in cooking, cleaning, washing at home (Acharya, 2014). Almostly this work is not done by male one. They make clean their children's clothes, old persons' clothes rather than male person. So they work for home environment protection to conservation of forest environment.

METHODOLOGY:

As the nature of the adopted objectives, this study is based on the qualitative design. Wolf and Pant (2005) opined, qualitative research is an approach to gathering and analyzing collected information using informal and formal techniques of data collection and analysis. Different techniques like in-depth interview, field observation, and focus group discussion (FGD) was applied for collection primary data (information). As Creswell (2012) suggested, to generated central idea and phenomena the informants were selected purposefully. It was necessary the informants who have the knowledge and practice of Hindu religion related on plant conservation. So three informants were selected for interview and six were selected for focus group discussion. They were from different ethnic communities like, Brahmin, Magar, Nepali of *Gaira Ban Samuha* (forest user group) but have knowledge on resources use sustainably and forest conservation. Tools were developed interview guidelines, observation checklist and guidelines for focus group discussion. In qualitative research unstructured tools can generate deep and purposeful data (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

In the study data are primary and secondary. Primary data were collected in the field and secondary data were obtained from various literatures that include books, journals, booklets, articles, website etc. The collected information helped the researcher to understand the problem which is going to study. As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) advised, qualitative method is multi-method, interpretive and naturalistic approach. It has socially constructed nature of reality.

The study was focused on sociocultural paradigm of women's environment conservation. Under this paradigm cultural, ethic, religious (spiritual) and practice of environment conservation. As suggested in Patton (2002) the information were collected in natural setting in the result get real information. We have followed the theoretical notion of qualitative research and have used the respective tools for collecting the field information to get real and complete picture of the subject matter which was not possible using the quantitative method.

With regards to Heale and Forbes (2013) the collected text data were analyzed and interpreted triangulating with different data, literature and theory for its trustworthy.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION:

The findings of the study is managed and discussed in the thematic way by determining four global themes. Under the global themes detail explanation of each verbatim was analyzed and interpreted which are given below.

Generation of Sociocultural Knowledge and Practice of Environment Conservation:

As the study was conducted in Brahmin, Magar and other communities where their knowledge and practices found more or less similar in plant conservation as well as environment conservation. Freeman said, the success of humankind is gathering, analysing, storing, and harnessing what other members of society know as well as drawing up on codified and documented knowledge (as cited in Gurung, 2009).

As found in the study, there is no specific pattern to follow for generating knowledge. Many educational institutions follow the western approaches to generate and transform knowledge. In this regard an informant Radha (80 years) informed that she has learned *mantras* to worship *tulsi* from her father's daily performance. Radha explained that her father use to take off right foot and stand only with left foot when chanting mantras during worship of sun on the tulsi moth. As she learnt those from her father. Firstly, she clean i.e., smear the tulsi moth and worship tulsi watering it and offer water to the sun also.

Her neighbor girls also learning mantra and following the pooja activities. Her sister-in-law as worship those sacred plants living as time to time *brata*. That is also promoting cultural phenomena of environment as well as plant conservation.

Another informant (Sunita) a member of community forestry said, she use to go to the school and deliberates the knowledge to students for forest management programme i.e., how to conserve and maintain them. She teaches them also for the significant of trees/forest for environment protection.

According to Bhushan (1994) sociologists and anthropologist use culture as a collective noun for the symbolic and learned aspects of human society including language, custom and conservation by which human behavior can be distinguished from that of other primates (p. 58). Like that socio-cultures are related with the religion which is stronger than formal laws. In the interview, informant informed conserving and worshipping the sacred plants like tulsi, bar/peepal is our Hindu culture. The ancestors generated the culture and their generations are following as a religious customs. As observed on the Saturday women were worshipping to peepal tree i.e., some were offering water, some were giving *dhaja*, some were lighting *dhup*. Quiry on this phenomenon, they opined:

We don't know about what sastra says, but this is our ancestral customary rule. Thus we cannot leave the phenomenon and should not leave our culture. (Field visit)

In the study of Bhalla (2007) found, the Padmapuran said that the peepal tree is a form of Lord Visnu. Therefore, it is accorded special importance for religious purposes. It is also believed that Lord Vishnu and Goddess Laxmi reside in the peepal tree (p. 69).

So in the observation, mostly the women worship Bar, Peepal (sacred plants). So their respect on plant and watering on the root get its development. Good environment is our heaven.

Socioeconomic Development:

According to the informants of the members of *Gaira ban samuha*, from the management of their forest they have facilities on collection of fodder (*Syaula, ghans* etc.) then they can keep cattle (buffalo, goat etc.). Keeping buffalo can make ghee and sell milk. They informed more, we can sell goats (*Khasi/boka*) that is another way of income generation which is supporting on children's schooling as well as some other house hold economical balance.

From the forest they can collect the money by certain tax who are cutting timber in the conserved forest. Also they are collecting money for fine from the people who are collecting resources (timber, fuel, etc.) out of their rule and regulation. Those money are used for the conservation of forest (salary for forest watchman) as well as social developmental works. That collected money is flowed/applied within the certain interest who has needed the money amongst their members. This *mahila samuha* of forest user group (FUG) system helps to develop the skills of work collaboratively to promote social and financial work connecting with environment protection. The collected money is also used for helping hand or to help for in very critical situation of the villager i.e., treatment, and other unexpected events. They also use the money for development of social infrastructures such as office of *Ban samuha*, *Amasamuha*, help to build school buildings, road for village. These phenomena promote to link between development of social environment and protection of natural environment.

This imposed to remember, Marxist economic theory which mention that money determine everything (Ritzer, 2000). So their forest conservation is benefitted in multiple purposes such as economical generation in family as well as community forest management.

Women as an Agriculturist:

In Nepali culture, women are the main person in agriculture. As field informants informed women preserve seeds for next season. They have knowledge how to preserve different kinds of seeds like paddy, maize, wheat, corn, yam etc.

because it is difficult to protect from insects, rats, fungus etc. They involve to grow the seeds and cultivate in appropriate season. Male would participate if they have leisure otherwise women work themselves. So they have knowledge on how to plant paddy, how to saw maize, and how to cultivate corns and how to plant yams. Women carry cow dungs/buffalo dungs in the field. So women are food producer as well as ecology manager. Deniggelis (2003) claims that, women perform the majority of all the agricultural tasks i.e., hoeing, weeding, harvesting, selecting seeds for cultivation, applying manure to the fields while male tasks include ploughing, chopping wood, constructing and maintaining terraces and building houses. According to informants, now a days most of the male seeking/going to foreign country for earning money. So house career, cultivator and environment manager are women in the village.

Women as Resource Collector:

Generally, women collect forest resources like fuel, fodder and wild food like vegetables, fruits etc. From this work they have known plants behave, their flowering/fruiting season. Also know how to rare and care them. They have also named and classified the plants of the forest. According to informants in focus group discussion informed they collect seasonal food (vegetable) like niuro (*Dryopteris cochleata*) Simligan (*Crataeva religiosa*), Koiralo (*Bauhenia purpurea*) as well as medicinal plants. If the collection is a lot, they can sell in the market. In this case they not only collect and use the forest resources but also care and conserve them and promote to environment protection. On this regard Rodda (1994) observes that it should be well informed on the cost of benefits of the sustainable use of natural resources. Women collect wild foods in different seasons as their suitable period such as herbaceous plants in spring up and wild mushroom in rainy season. It is important to see these women as key agents in maintain and improving the quality and stock of natural resources through a development path which is both sustainable and profitable for them and their families welfare as well as environment protection.

In cutting firewood, they choose the twig or branches, but men cut the trees haphazardly. So they destroy the forest (Zhonghua, 2003). The author says again, in community forest program women involve mostly for thinning and pruning. So there become involvement of different ethnic groups of the community.

CONCLUSION:

This study tries to explore women's environment conservation in Nepal. It has given the phenomenon of sociocultural knowledge and practice of environment conservation in the Nepali community. In the study of sociocultural perspective, contains economical, religious, cultural as well as livelihood strategy. According to the nature of objectives the study methodology was applied qualitative approach and variety of techniques like in-depth interview, FGD and participant observation were used for text data collection for strengthening the research and data were triangulated to get trustworthy and meaning making. Women play a key role on rearing and caring on their family, forest, plants as well as their environment. The rural village women, most of their time is spent on the management of their house environment, forest environment, agricultural environment etc. In the tendency of environment degradation women's sociocultural knowledge and practice can play a vital role on minimize the degrading environment.

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